

Stress Factors and Coping Strategies among Workers in an Organization

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ABSTRACT

This article focuses on stress factors and coping strategies among workers. Stress has posed a worrisome situation that affects the performance of workers. In the bid to cope with such situations workers usually employ certain strategies. Extensive review of related literature was carried out and the article relied on secondary source of data. The study findings show that workers perceive workload, inadequate facilities, method and style of management as stressors and they cope with them by recognizing their limits, relaxing, being friendly, engaging in physical exercise and so on. The article recommends among other things that provision of conducive working environment, seminars and workshops, retraining of workers be carried out. Workers should be allowed to participate in decision-making.

Keywords: Stress, Management, Workers, Organisation productivity

INTRODUCTION

People work in different organizations for goal attainment. The extent to which they work depends on their strength and capabilities. Some people work better when they find themselves in difficult situations, while others easily break down.

Stress as part of human existence is an inevitable challenge. It is an excessive demand made on people and disturbs the psychological, social and physiological systems. The challenges of life could occur in various work settings, so there is need for one to cope with these challenges to maintain equilibrium. Stress is one of the hurdles against efficient work practice. Several stress factors that workers face within their work environment and beyond hinder them greatly from giving out their best.

Stress, according to Ihundu (1999), means any characteristic of one's immediate environment that poses a threat to the individual. For French (2000), stress is a condition that occurs when

there is an imbalance (real and imagined) between situational demands and a person's ability to respond adequately to those demands. Stress as a pressure, tension or worry arises from problems of life. Work pressure, academic pressure or even family pressure will lead to stress. When one is burdened with a lot of worries and thoughts, he or she often ends up with stress.

The problem of stress among individuals has been studied by different authors and it has been found that stress provides adverse consequences. In evaluating the impact of stress generally, Ekpo (2002) maintained that stress has been associated with a number of negative outcomes such as low achievement scores, low productivity, absenteeism, withdrawal from activities and work, and even death.

In essence, stress is usually associated with negative states such as illness, tension, absenteeism, low academic performance, lack of commitment to work and low expectation from others. Seyle (1997) defines stress as pressure from an adverse force or influence that imposes unusual demands on an organism. Stress is distress, oppression, hardship and adversity.

Stress is the wear and tear of the body that occurs while it responds to stressful agents. Stress is a state in which a strong demand is made on the nervous system during which an individual finds him or herself in deep frustration, anger, fear and great anxiety. Denga and Ekpo (1994) referred to stress as a situation in which a change disturbs the equilibrium of an individual while experiencing perceived threats to his or her well-being and self-esteem.

Cole (1997) presented stress as bodily changes that take place with intolerable pitch causing weakened job performance and ill health. Akubue (2002) saw stress as a person's adaptive response to stimulus that places excessive psychological or physical demand on him or her.

These definitions show that stress is caused by a stimulus, which can either be physical or psychological and every individual responds to stimulus in different ways. The definitions also show that stress could be understood as source of discomfort, tension and emotional pain that arises when an individual is faced with a situation that presents a demand that is important for the individual to meet but the individual's capacities and resources cannot adequately meet those demands, particularly because the demands are imposed by the environment.

Stress is therefore a part of normal life. It occurs in daily human living and events as a result of how individuals react to adverse situations. Denga and Ekpo (1994) described it as something that could not be avoided; it is a process that is continually evoked throughout one's life. In other words, any change or occurrence in an individual's life, whether pleasant or unpleasant, usually requires some kind of human readjustments. This readjustment disturbs or disrupts the normal psychological well-being of a person, and as a result, he or she experiences stress.

Stress is a condition of mental and physical exertion, brought about as a result of harassing events or dissatisfying elements in the environment. Cole (1997) agreed with this view, noting that the adverse psychological and physical reactions that occur in an individual as a result of his or her being unable to cope with the demands made on them results in unavoidable stress.

It is important to note that stress does not directly occur in institutions or jobs. Rather, it occurs to the people in these institutions. It is not a cause but an effect, not an action but a reaction. This is why Iwuji (1990) posited that living is synonymous with stress and that when an individual fails to deal adequately with such pressure signs of stress appear and that every individual encounters stress as a way of life.

CAUSES OF STRESS

Attempt is made here to discuss briefly some of the causes of stress in the work place and they are as follows:

1. Management styles and administrative problems

Historically, surveys have showed that major causes of stress among workers are not unconnected with management issues. Some administrative and managerial stress includes administrative and managerial highhandedness by management, poor human relations, poor approach to workers needs, undesirable administrative policies, faulty decisions and frequent changes in work schedules and so on.

There is also inadequate communication between management and workers. Others include leadership style in the work place, which excludes workers from decision-making processes that affects them, duty rosters that makes unreasonable demands on them and the absence of an appropriate policy for the management of behaviour. Other sources of stress include, according to Ubah (1999), is having to work in an unsatisfactory organizational environment that lack adequate facilities and where work materials are barely available and tools and equipment available are inadequate.

2. Inadequate facilities

Poor facilities are likely to be associated with stress factors. Lack of proper rest rooms for workers in certain organizations, poor social welfare facilities, lack of certain materials and equipment for work and so on also lead to stress.

3. Individual personalities

Conflicting personalities and behaviours may cause stress. Conflict, according to Perce and Molloy

(1990), occurs when two or more people must work together even though their personalities, attitudes and behaviours differ. Akubue (2002), illustrating the issue of conflicts as stressors, stated that a person with an internal locus of control (i.e., one who always wants to control) might get frustrated in a place where most workers like to wait and just let things happen.

Haber *et al.* (1987) says that as people interact with neighbours, friends and co-workers they encounter various situations in which their own beliefs, values, preferences, wishes, needs and perceptions do not agree with other people. When people work, live or play in close proximity, idiosyncratic behaviours, mannerisms and life styles can be abrasive and cause stress or develop into chronically stressful patterns of interaction.

More so, Levin (1951) and Murray (1997) see stress as being essentially a function of the demands of the task requirements that the worker must meet in order to perform satisfactorily. Stress arises with the internal demands of work environment such as work group, supervision and leadership (Marsh, 1978).

It should be pointed out that stress could be studied from the point of view of personal problems of individual. This aspect of stress was described by Akubue (2002) as stress originating from the individual and is called life trauma.

Life trauma is any upheavals in an individual's life that may incite strange emotions or behaviours. Major life traumas that may incite strange emotions include marital problems, family difficulties and debilitating health problems initially related to stress. For instance, a worker undergoing a process of divorce may experience emotional turmoil that may be stressful. The loss of a loved one is a major source for an individual's stress that has been shown to affect people adversely.

Stressful conditions may present subjective experience of the individual when events associated with his or her status interacts with his or her personal traits. This obviously causes a change in the individual's psychological conditions, such that the individual is forced to deviate from normal functioning. It is therefore important to adopt several strategies to cope with stresses of life so that an individual's learning ability and performance will be fostered.

CONSEQUENCES OF STRESS

In this study, the consequences of stress are examined as follows:

- (i) *Performance*: Akubue (2002) presented one clear organizational consequence of too much stress as decline in efficiency and productivity of workers. Stress results in low productivity and poor performance. That is to say, when workers are overstressed it

results in decline in their performance and as such translates into poor-quality work and inefficient productivity.

- (ii) *Withdrawal*: Withdrawal behaviours also can result from stress. Consenting to this, Uche (1992) noted that the withdrawal of workers as a result of stress is higher. Akubue (2002) noted that absenteeism, excuse duties and quitting occur easily. People who are having a hard time coping with stress in their workplaces are more likely to call in sick or submit excuse duty for good. It has been noticed that some just stop coming to work without notice.
- (iii) *Attitudes*: Another direct organizational consequence of stress relates to workers' attitudes towards their duty. Workers could develop negative attitudes towards their jobs and might begin to doubt their usefulness. As a result, they become prone to complain easily, avoid certain duties and reluctantly perform some.
- (iv) *Burnout*: This is another consequence of stress that has clear implications for both people and the organization. It is a syndrome common among people where work involves intense emotional interactions with others over a prolonged period. Burnout can involve physical exhaustion, a cynical and dehumanizing view of clients and a loss of capacity for empathy or respect for clients.

Under the burden of overwhelming demands, loss of self-confidence and psychological withdrawal might follow. In the words of Akubue (2002), "The person literally exhausts his or her aspirations and motivations as much as candle burns itself out"; in other words, burnout results. At this point, the worker shows coming late to work, frequent absenteeism with flimsy excuses, putting in longer hours carrying out a job, avoiding certain jobs and generally displaying mental and physical exhaustion.

STRATEGIES FOR STRESS MANAGEMENT

The steps that management and individuals can take to reduce the experience of stress among workers can be through stress avoidance or reduction measures. Cole (1997) highlighted certain steps that can be taken to control stress:

- Design job schedules to permit maximum use of skill and discretion
- Design decision-making to permit exercise of responsibility, giving sufficient authority and allowing the workers to share in decisions that affect them
- Encourage experienced managers and supervisors to develop participatory management styles, paying attention to individual and group needs
- Encourage team spirit among workers
- Develop deep positive attitude towards work.

Akubue (2002, p. 35) enumerated several stress reduction measures, including the following:

- Reduction of the number of changes expected for any individual or team
- Limit procedural and other complexities associated with the execution of tasks
- Permit individuals to express their feelings and anxieties to someone else, for example, boss, colleagues and trained counsellors
- Provide sport and social facilities
- Provide adequate canteen and rest-room facilities.

Hume (1994) and Wallis (1996) wrote on how to deal with stress-related issues. Consequently, some of the coping techniques are looked at under the following headings:

- Sports and relaxation:* Regular physical fitness exercises, such as walking, jogging, swimming, playing tennis, cycling and skipping can be very useful in handling both existing stressful conditions and potential ones. Such exercises, according Wallis (1996), will help to burn up excess adrenalin in the system (i.e., a substance secreted by the adrenal gland in the human body that increases the heart rate and speed when one is excited, afraid or angry and, in the long-run, stimulate the production of natural morphine-like chemicals in the body, inducing a feeling of well-being and relieving nervous fatigue).
- Behavioural self-control:* This is a way of maintaining some degree of self-control and restrain in handling difficult situations or sensitive matters that could otherwise put someone under stress. People can achieve self-control by deliberately managing the antecedents.
- Cognitive therapy:* Cognitive therapy techniques have been quite successful over the years in handling stress. Cognitive therapy is a treatment programme that can handle stress-related problems by emphasizing the positive and freewill aspects of the individual.
- Socialization:* According to Ekpo (2002), this is the way individuals interact with other members of a group or organization and freely exchange ideas pleasantries. Such a close association among trusted colleagues and co-workers has often helped to replace and/or reduce stress among members.

CONCLUSION

The study has shown that workload, inadequacy of physical facilities and administrative methods are major stressors that affect workers.

It is also a known fact that the adoption of coping strategies such as having fun, good sense of humour and recognizing work limits, among other things, can serve as strategies for coping with stress. If the need to pursue a sustainable profit margins becomes a priority for management, then the observed high stress among workers seems to suggest that urgent measures are needed

to be taken to expose workers to workshops that provide training to acquaint them with the management of stress.

In conclusion, therefore, management should identify the best possible ways to establish a worker-friendly environment and stress-free atmosphere that encourage workers to give their best.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The study makes the following recommendations:

- There is need for management to expose workers and supervisors to seminars and workshop that will educate them on how to reduce stress in the workplace.
- It is also important for management to expose all cadres of workers to specific approaches and strategies of coping with stress in the workplace and at home.
- Management can reduce stress by making sure that facilities are in steady supply and the existing ones are regularly maintained.
- Management should device means of creating stress-free environment by involving workers in decisions that has to do with their welfare.
- Orientation can be given to workers on better and more positive means of easing off stress.

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